

Castlemaine Naturalist

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Kookaburra



A Salutory Tale - Nigel Harland

I have read the newsletter for nearly 20 years now and the vast majority of articles have described events of a positive nature. I have written a few myself and they have all fallen into that category. This one doesn't. Those of you who know me will understand that my main passion in life is birdwatching and in recent years I have become an unashamed twitcher. I have travelled all over the country looking for birds I have never seen before. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but it's a generally harmless pastime – if sometimes a little expensive! Anne is interested in birds, but not to the same extent as me. A Ruff at the Werribee Sewage Farm holds little attraction for Anne, but I was there in double quick time looking for a tick. We decided to go to Port Macquarie for a short break before Christmas – not a birding holiday, more to see a part of the country we hadn't seen for a number of years. However, I worked out that the Rufous Scrub-bird did live in the Werrikimbe Ranges – just a short drive from Port Macquarie. It can only be found above 600 metres in that part of the country.

We both went up on the first day and spent some time looking. It was a two-hour drive from Port Macquarie into fairly remote country. We heard the call, but couldn't make visual contact despite a lot of trying. I said to Anne that I would like to have one more try and she declined, so I headed off on my own the next day. I spent 4 or 5 hours searching, with the same result. There was one spot where the bird called regularly and seemingly from the same spot, so I concluded that it might be nesting there – the season was right for nesting. The habitat was not dense, but consistent tree cover, with ferns about a metre high filling the gaps. The calling came from a spot about 10 metres from the track, so I decided to wade in through the fern understorey. I headed to the side of the spot the call was coming from, perhaps in line with the call, but some 5 metres to the side. The call persisted, but I still had no visual evidence of the bird. I stayed there for about half an hour, with no result.

I headed back to the track, but I wasn't sure of the direction. In my haste to find the bird, I had forgotten to take a bearing of my starting point. I hadn't seen another person all day; it is not the sort of place that is inhabited on Tuesdays. I looked around and found no evidence of the track or my ramblings off it. Having only moved 10 metres, I would have been best advised to mark my spot and traverse a circle of a 15-metre radius using that spot as the centre. It is easy to think that way now, but at the time my mind was not quite so organised. I decided I knew the way, so I headed off in that direction. I must have travelled 30 or 40 metres with no sign of a track and a loss of memory as to where I started. My heart started to beat faster and a sense of panic set in. I now no longer knew where I was and had less idea of where I had come from. It was 3pm and Anne was expecting me home before 7pm, so I still had lots of time.

I had walked along the track a few times before and there were two streams which crossed it and both were flowing freely. My mind was still alert enough to hear one of the streams, so I thought the best thing to do was to head towards it. My sense of direction told me it was the stream nearest the car park. So I headed through the bracken in the direction of the sound. It took me half an hour or so to find it. I knew the streams went downstream over the track, so I waded in and headed downstream. Before long the stream deepened and before I knew it, I couldn't reach the bottom. So I floated on my back under logs which had fallen across the stream. My binoculars were still around my neck and I recalled being told that they were waterproof to a depth of 30 metres – funny the things that come to mind in such circumstances.

The sense of panic was increasing and when the deep spot had passed, I stood upright and made a very silly decision. I decided to get out of the stream on the opposite side to the one I had entered it on and keep walking. As I write this, I can see no logical reason for that decision, but something must have made me do it. The bracken seemed to get thicker, causing me to walk much slower and to fall over frequently, but I carried on for a while, until I realised I had left the stream behind and could hardly hear it. Fortunately a bit of common sense returned and I headed back to the noise of the stream. It took me quite a while to find it again, but at least my sense of hearing was intact – if most other senses had deserted me. I saw the stream and there was a huge log over the top of it. For some reason I thought I had seen this log before. My heart raced even faster as I waded across the stream alongside the log. On the other side it looked like people had been there before, the bracken was flat and

a track emerged. I followed the track and it emerged onto the path from the car park!!!!

As it turned out it was not the stream I thought it was, it was the one much further along from the car park. I walked back to the car and emptied my pockets. Despite being a little wet, everything was there – my wallet, car keys and iPod on which I keep my bird calls. Fortunately I had a change of clothes in the car, for use after a thunderstorm – not a fully clothed swim! I changed my clothes and decided it wouldn't be a good idea to drive down the mountain immediately, so I went back along the track and heard the scrub-bird calling again. So I sat and waited for another hour – but not a sighting – no happy ending to the story.

I drove back and told Anne the story. We theorised as to what might have happened if I hadn't found a way out and I'd rather not think of those things. One day I'll find the bird and think of the heartache it has caused me. The bird will never know.

Biodiversity Blueprint Project – Chris Morris

A leading woodland/wildlife conservation group has secured a grant from the Norman Wettenhall Foundation to produce a Biodiversity Blueprint for the Mount Alexander Shire. The blueprint will be produced by a recently appointed project worker under the direction of a steering committee in consultation with a reference group representing a wide range of environment and community interests in the area.

It is hoped that the blueprint will lead to more effective action to protect and enhance biodiversity in the Shire and to this end the project will be based solidly on local knowledge as well as formal research.

The successful applicant to the position of project worker is Julie von Platen who will start in February. The contact people are Bernard Slattery and Marie Jones of Friends of the Box-Ironbark Forests who will be pleased to receive any thoughts and ideas to progress the study.

CFNC Annual Secondary College Prize

Each year for the past five years our club has donated \$100 book prize to a senior student for outstanding environmental work. Our congratulations this year goes to Alice McNabb, a Year 12 student from Newstead. Alice is the winner of the CFNC Prize for 2007.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

Defence Manoeuvres recorded over Guildford Plateau

Maurie Dynon's daughter had been visiting her family from Miami, Florida. She wanted some Kookaburra calls to take back to America, so one evening about dusk she went out with Maurie and her husband to make a recording.

Some Kookaburras were calling about 200m in the distance. As that was a bit far for a good recording she walked towards the birds making "kookaburra calls" to get them going. Afterwards Maurie described his daughter's kookaburra imitations as "quite remarkable" - she did them so well. Suddenly the Kookaburras came flying up the gully through the trees towards her; they landed in the Grey Box directly above and started a very loud and demonstrative chorus of protest against this strange intruder in their territory!

Having successfully recorded their protests Maurie's daughter and her husband walked back up towards the house block and sat under a tree with Maurie. The Kookaburras followed in hot pursuit and landed above them in the same tree. They clearly knew who they were targetting and proceeded to break off sticks and drop them on the intruder(s) seated below!

Maurie has never seen such behaviour before and would not have believed Kookaburras capable of such a targeted attack if he had not witnessed it. He played his daughters recording for me over the phone and their indignation was certainly evident and their purpose very clear! I said to Maurie that I thought I recognised some swear words amongst their calls and he said that was exactly his interpretation too! The birds made it very clear that there was definitely no room for any newcomer in their territory no matter how good her call!

Geraldine Harris

Vale Frank Blake – 1915 - 2007

Frank Blake, one of the very early members of our club, was a kind person and a true gentleman. He had an excellent knowledge of native flowers and was an accomplished nature photographer. Frank maintained his association with our club after shifting to Shepparton some years ago and will be remembered by long standing members for his infectious laughter. Our deepest sympathy to Ethel and family.

Annual Members' "Show and Tell"- 14/12/07

Invited to be creative with their contributions, members were again treated with a wide variety of presentations at our final meeting for 2007.

Items included:

- A short excerpt from a training video on Linear Reserve Management aimed at educating roadside contract workers and produced in 1992 by the DSE. Sadly the material seemed to indicate a greater awareness than of the environmental value of roadside reserves and the importance of protecting such areas. Geraldine Harris.
- Athol Dorman showed an interesting collection of slides ranging from close-up studies of nature (including an Emperor Gum Moth caterpillar and the rebound formation resulting from a drop of water falling into water), to studies of large trees and beautiful wilderness areas in Victoria and Tasmania.
- Noel Young showed slides of some of his early attempts at bird watching: at Anglesea building a huge scaffolding of pipes to photograph a Whistling Kite on her nest with one chick; and images of a Red Avocets and two chicks from a pre-made hide in northern Victoria.
- Tony Morton brought news of dozens of Common Imperial Blue or Imperial Hairstreak (butterflies) along Forest Creek Road (from Best's Motors) about 200m on the right of the track on Black Wattle *Acacia mearnsii* and Wirilda Wattle *Acacia retinodes*. He reported ants creeping all over the larvae and plenty of adults flying about. The males cluster around the pupae just before the females emerge. The Eltham Copper Butterfly was also very visible in December in the Botanical Gardens and along the track north of the rotunda at Kalimna.
- Rita Mills showed a selection of colourful scenes and desert plants from Fraser Range Sheep Station, situated near Belladonia north of Esperance, in WA.
- Natalie de Maccus brought along some books about her 2007 trip to the Grand Canyon.
- Hans van Gemert took us to visit the "habitat tree" at the Coongie Lakes, 100 km north of Innamincka and showed us a variety of water birds from the area.
- Dorothy Bessant read her own beautiful poem "How to find wildflowers and write about them".
- George Evans completed the evening with a wonderful recital of "Albert and the Lion" and a couple of limericks.

Thank you to all those who participated and provided a very enjoyable finale to our year.

Vaughan Springs 15/12/07.

On Saturday members spent a very pleasant afternoon at Vaughan Springs which included some bird watching, a stroll to see the Aboriginal Grinding stone and a wander up the hill to Tony and Jenny Mortons' wonderful garden, followed by a BYO meal under the Elms (which are very badly affected by Elm Beetle) back at the Springs.

A Mould that acts like an Amoeba.

Helen Morris described a jelly-like mass she discovered on their woodchip mulch as sulphurous coloured, the size of a large dinner plate and not unlike very soft scrambled eggs! When she lifted it up, after it had been covered with a plastic bag and left for several days, black powdery spores were evident under a darkened more solid surface.

Subsequently Helens find was identified as Myxomycota or Slime Mould, *Fuligo septica*. These moulds are now classified as a separate kingdom Protocista. They share some of the characteristics of amoeba and fungi. The mature fruit body (the sporangium) produces spores that eventually develop into a creeping slime-like mass called a plasmodium. The plasmodium acts like a giant amoeba, feeding on bacteria, fungi and decaying organic matter. When the food supply is exhausted, or in response to changing conditions, the plasmodium undergoes a transformation to once again produce a sporangium.

Often included in the fungal literature, Bruce Fuhrer included them in his fungi book "to stimulate interest in these relatively little known organisms". (Fuhrer B, 2005. *A Field Guide to Australian Fungi*, p 343-5, Bloomin Books, Melbourne)

Annual BOCA Bird Challenge Count - 1/12/07:

Species numbers much the same, actual numbers down.

Dawn Breakfast at the Barkers Creek Reservoir - 12/1/08:

Five members attended. 28 species different species were recorded.

EXTRA EVENT

Sat Feb 23 – Mar 3. Scene from the air - Changing Landscapes

Friends of the Box-Ironbark are launching a photographic display featuring changing landscapes in this area. Aerial photos taken in 1947 will be compared with current aerial photos with an interpretation of some key features. The launch will be on Saturday 23rd February at 11am in the Phee Broadway Theatre Foyer with the display being open during Library hours until Monday 3rd March. More details will be available later. Marie Jones 5472 2892

Observations

- Good views of White-browed Woodswallows and pair of White-winged Trillers off Sawmill Road during BOCA Bird Count. Geoff Harris
- White-browed Woodswallow building its nest using twigs from the only remaining understorey available to it - a dead shrub. Especially in a time of drought, fuel reduction burns leave little building material for birds to use. Dennis Hurley
- Small nest (possibly a wren's) brought along to show how the resourceful bird had made use of pillow fill fibres to make its nest snug. Dennis Hurley
- Dusky Woodswallow on its nest in garden, two Crested Shrike-tits in the birdbath and Chestnut-rumped Heathwren at Muckleford South. Alison Rowe
- Mobs of 25-30 kangaroos on the flats in Blakeleys Road. Also concern with the poor state of magpies in same area – alpha female bedraggled, almost bald and has failed to breed this season. Australian Ravens and Grey Currawongs however have been breeding successfully! Rita Mills
- While camping on the Glenelg River, woken by the song of the quite shy Rufous Bristlebird – could hear it for a long time before it finally appeared. Julie Hurley
- Noel Young brought a tail feather presumed to be from one of the Powerful Owls in the Botanical Gardens.
- Powerful Owl also reported in Moscript Street, Campbells Creek – could be same birds (as above) as range thought to be approx 7 km. Helen and Chris Morris
- Nesting Yellow Thornbills in garden that were very active have disappeared – possibly the work of neighbouring cats. Virginia Bartlam
- On a ¾ hour walk along the Campaspe River, eighteen species of birds sighted – The Clamorous Reed Warbler was the most interesting. Joy Wetherill
- George Broadway read a Mount Alexander Mail article of 1858 from Jacob Little Esq. referring to an abundance of “native silk” produced by insects found on every tree in the local area; samples had been sent off to London, Liverpool and Paris in order that its commercial value be ascertained. Do any of our readers know what this “native silk” might have been?

From the Business Meeting 25/1/08

- Recommendation that 2008 fees be raised by \$5 for each category.
- Decision made to cease roadside cleanup due to increased regulation requirements that make such voluntary work impractical.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme

February 2008

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 8.00 pm.

Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

Business meetings - fourth Thursday of each month, except December, at Broadways, 7 Wheeler Street, at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

Fri Feb 8. AGM. Election of Office Bearers and Committee. Speaker: Beth Mellick (Norman Wettenhall Foundation), **Biodiversity Blueprint Project.** UCA Hall, 8pm.

Sat Feb 9. Field Trip: Metcalfe Cascades. Depart from opposite the motel in Duke St at 1.30pm sharp. BYO afternoon tea. Leader: George Broadway.

Mar 7–13. SEANA Autumn Campout, Naracoorte, SA. Host: Naracoorte Lucindale Field Naturalists Club.

Fri Mar 14. Wildlife Rescue Service. Garry Cheers. UCA Hall, 8pm.

Sat Mar 15. Field trip: Maryborough Area. Depart from opposite the motel in Duke St at 1.30pm sharp. BYO afternoon tea.

2007 Committee

Natalie de Maccus (President) 5472 4499

Alison Rowe (Treasurer) 0408 899 283

Hans van Gemert (Public Officer) 5472 1082

Debbie Worland 5472 2474

George Broadway (Secretary) 5472 2513

Geraldine Harris (Newsletter Editor) 5474 2244

Rita Mills 5472 4553

Chris Morris 0418 996 289

Richard Piesse 0448 572 867

Noel Young 5472 1345

georgebroadway@bigpond.com

gedharris@castlemaine.net

Recommended Subscriptions for 2008 (to be decided at AGM)

Ordinary membership: Single \$27, Family \$35

Pensioner or student: Single \$24, Family \$29

Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist.

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS ARE DUE AND MAY BE PAID AT THE FEB AGM.

**Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc. PO Box 324, Castlemaine, 3450.Inc
#A0003010B**